

Spatial Inserts, in: Matters of Communication, DGTF, forthcoming
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New York, 1929. Alfred Barr Jr. moved the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) into its new permanent home on West 53rd Street, to establish what would later be called the White Cube: the promise of a homogenously bright and neutral gallery space that escaped from the realities of the external world into enlightened (exclusive) Western modernity.¹

Paris, 1929. Georges Bataille started *Documents*,² “an art review offset by an anomalous (hétéroclite) section,” a heterogeneous and dark insert into the academic art magazine. In the moment of the rise of Fascism in Europe, Bataille, with teeth gritted,³ would try a contre-attaque⁴ against dominant and totalizing reason.

If Bataille inserted a heterogeneous section into a homogeneous magazine, how can this operation be translated to the White Cube (and the Black Box that is a White Cube after all), to its still intact mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and totalizing effects? What would be an offset in the exhibition space? More concretely: how can we move Bataille’s section into the exhibition space, how can we evolve such a politics of form?

For only two years, Bataille would run the magazine insert that combined and, at the same time, transgressed the fields of ethnology, aesthetics and philosophy. Articles about the mouth, museum, the slaughter house and the big toe (introduced as the most human part of the body) were arranged with photographs of ancient medallions, skyscrapers, Parisian abattoirs, Picasso's portraits and Hollywood musicals among other things. In direct relation to the images of a fish chasing other (smaller) fish, of an ape in a costume and of a collapsing prison, a short article reads:

“SPACE. - 1. Questions of Propriety. - It is not surprising that the mere utterance of the word space should introduce philosophical protocol. Philosophers, being the masters of ceremony of the abstract universe, have pointed out how space should behave under all circumstances.

Unfortunately space remains a lout, and it is difficult to enumerate what it engenders. It is as discontinuous as it is devious, to the utter despair of its philosopher-papa. I should, moreover, prefer not to refresh the memory of persons who interest themselves, professionally or for the want of something better to do, out of confusion or for a laugh, in the behaviour of that scallywag at odds with society: to wit, how it is that, under our modestly averted eyes, space breaks all obligatory continuity. Without one's being able to say why, it seems that an ape dressed as a woman is no more than a division of space. In reality, the dignity of space is so well established and associated with that of the stars, that it is incongruous to assert that space might become a fish swallowing another. Space will be still more frightfully disappointing when it is said that

¹ See Christoph Grunberg, “The Politics of Presentation: The Museum of Modern Art, New York,” in *Art Apart: Art Institutions and Ideology Across England and North America*, ed. Marcia Pointon, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, 192–210.

² Bringing together texts and images by ex-Surrealists, museum curators, professors of psychiatry and art history, and ethnographers, the magazine “Documents” was financed by Georges Wildenstein, proprietor of the celebrated “Gazette des Beaux-Arts”. Controversies and compromises were significant between authors. The publisher would finally stop the magazine after 15 editions, also because it would not sell.

³ See Alastair Brotchie, “Introduction,” in *Encyclopédia Acephalia*, ed. Georges Bataille, assembled & introduced by Alastair Brotchie, London: Atlas Press, 1995, 9

⁴ Contre-Attaque was called the anti-fascist movement Bataille founded together with André Breton in the 1930 s. While it lasted only 18 months, there were organized meetings at the Place de la Concorde in Paris.

it takes the form of an ignoble initiation rite practised by some Negroes, desperately absurd, etc . . .

Space would of course be far better off doing its duty and fabricating the philosophical idea in professors' apartments!

Obviously it will never enter anybody's head to lock the professors up in prison to teach them what space is (the day, for example, the walls collapse before the bars of their dungeons).”

Space with fish

The text is part of the anomalous section that Bataille called the *critical dictionary*, a collection of text-image collages (re-)defining most heterogeneous objects and ideas to compromise the very idea of a modern, systematic lexicon, whose purpose actually is to impose form and homology. Together, or against each other, texts and images would propose an opposition to any homogenic representation of the world, in favor of radical heterogeneity. Together, or against each other, they would reject any coherent (illustrative) image-text relation and instead advocate the ambiguity of both form and meaning. Ultimately, texts and images of the dictionary would refuse to be instruments in any authoritative argumentation in that they would realize, in various ways, a concrete politics of form. Something alien approached science, the unclassifiable element of spittle, separated in 1. Spittle-Soul and 2. Mouth Water appeared; strange images gathered: a magnified lobster claw, and massive enlargements of tiny ancient coins; a poetic invective, a pornographic drift or the sudden end of a line of thought happened. The dictionary would not just disrupt homogeneity by heterogeneity. It, moreover, inserted into the art magazine its own critical self-reflection, or more accurately its critical self-disruption—a rupture or a rip of heterogeneous texts and images interfering with the journal's main part of academic writings on ancient and modern art and ethnography. Georges Bataille (1897—1962), who worked as an archivist and a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, would counter the dominant order with his text-image mixture of analysis, playfulness and shock. Again: how can his politics of form be translated into the exhibition space?

In his dictionary, Bataille would lay out his own concept of and position towards space. Addressing the binary notions of space and position as a dynamic and, at the same time, political relation, he proposed a definition: Space can be a fish swallowing another fish that might in turn be swallowed by a fish. It is constituted by the distinction between inside and outside, opposite states that, yet, turn out to be provisory and even nested. What was outside in one minute, can become inside in the next. If the difference between interior and exterior can never be fixed, Bataille recognized it moreover as resulting from (violent) acts of coercion. These can come as inclusion and exclusion or placement and displacement; they are not just possible (simultaneous) effects of a space, but fundamentally and existentially its cause: The moment of the fish realizing its position in the space around it is the moment of its death.

Against the definition of the architectural—architecture marks the first article in the dictionary, after all—as that which is ordered or ordering, space includes those phenomena, processes, and characteristics, united by their opposition to homogeneity, to authoritative order and static power. Space is as discontinuous as it is devious, breaking all obligatory continuity that architecture promises to save. It is, in fact, a dynamic attack on architecture, that corset that dominates—literally and metaphorically—the whole earth. For Bataille,

space means the capacity of a lout to subvert both architecture's social and physical power. Thus, it does not follow architecture's logic and repressive imposition of form on nature, in which "Man would seem to represent merely an intermediary stage within the morphological development between monkey and building."⁵

As Bataille considered space as transgressive, dissolving physical and social boundaries, it could easily take the form of an initiation rite; it was rather to be found in the slaughterhouse, where "real rites of sacred horror occur daily, albeit cursed, and shameful" than in the museum, "where the heterogeneous is crucified before a crowd whose only ecstasies are the pale effusions of art critics."⁶

Be it cannibalism, rite or the openings and wounds of the human body, space, for Bataille, ultimately becomes a shock. A shock that refers to discontinuity, to the rejection of Cartesian principles, norms of geometrism, to the violence of a rogue and its subversive disrespect for decency (the continuity of habits), for the logical rules and laws that govern the circle of "civilized" society. Space is ultimately imagined "as an impact like that of Hume's two marbles: it is the only possible expression of the instantaneous, of the simultaneous, the very idea of which, outside of itself, remains inadmissible."⁷

Insert 1: Temporary Forms of a City

Spatial intervention, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich 2017

The instantaneous and the simultaneous might be regarded as the main aspects of today's spaces, of the multiple ways in which we live together, neighbor and provoke each other, share and fight across political, geographical, and social, across physical and digital territories. Walter Benjamin might still recognize in these ephemeral elements a "material of vital importance for us ... In any case, material of vital importance politically; this is demonstrated by the attachment of the Surrealists to these things, as much as by their exploitation in contemporary fashion."⁸

The exhibition in Munich⁹ was showing temporary forms of a city, that is, instant, ephemeral and precarious urban phenomena: refugee camps, festivals, military bases, and informal markets; spaces that transgress the physical and social borders of continuous cities. The show investigated the processes that relate, question and even collapse these spaces to and with each other. It presented the shock effected by those spaces that challenge distance as the shortest length between two points: the distance between the Carnival in Rio¹⁰ and

⁵ Georges Bataille, "Critical Dictionary," in *Encyclopédia Acephalia*, ed. Georges Bataille, assembled & introduced by Alastair Brotchie, London: Atlas Press, 1995, 35

⁶ *Ibid*, 24

⁷ *Ibid*, 78

In "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding" from 1772 David Hume noted: "This proposition, that causes and effects are discoverable, not by reason but by experience, will readily be admitted with regard to such objects, as we remember to have once been altogether unknown to us, since we must be conscious of the utter inability, which we then lay under, of foretelling what would arise from them. Present two smooth pieces of marble to a man who has no tincture of natural philosophy: he will never discover that they will adhere together in such a manner as to require great force to separate them in a direct line, while they make so small a resistance to a lateral pressure."

Retrieved from: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/en/hume.htm>

⁸ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, First Harvard University Press Paperback edition, 2002, N1,11

⁹ "Does Permanence Matter" exhibition at Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, 2017; curatorial team: Rahul Mehrotra, Felipe Vera, Andres Lepik, Marcelo della Giustina, Asli Serbest, Mona Mahall

¹⁰ The Carnival in Rio, the biggest in the world, hosts 2500000 daily visitors on its streets. In 1984, Oscar Niemeyer designed a massive concrete tribune, called the Sambódrome, to bring order to the chaotic nature of the feast by providing seating for around 80000 spectators. Niemeyer's permanent structure aligns the temporary, mobile floats, and stratifies the audience. For the opening of the parade area, the traditional colorful carnival

Corrail Cesselesse Refugee Camp¹¹ in Haiti or the distance between FOB Lightning, a Military Camp¹² in Afghanistan and the Organic Weekly Market¹³ at Türkenstrasse located next to the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich.

The exhibition also presented the shock affected by those spaces that challenge time as a linear succession of events: the time that remains until Chuquicamata in Chile is destroyed by the extraction site that produced this small city in the first place, or the time of Rom Hoop Market that is clocked by a train (in the moment the train approaches, the stalls and goods are moved away from the tracks to be put back immediately after the train has passed). The question was: how to show these temporary city forms, rites, plays, fights, and shocks that exist across the world, simultaneously but disparately, in relation to ideas about technology, life, material, and collectivity?

The spatial intervention brought together —not according to the homologous logic of a taxonomy or a dictionary, but according to the number of inhabitants— the temporary forms of the city, to let them acknowledge, inform, support, resist, and contradict each other. These precarious forms often show disturbing parallelisms, e.g. similar construction techniques, materiality, and aesthetics with a refugee camp and a festival; yet, they exhibit radical heterogeneity when we realize that the former functions as a prison and the latter as a gated community; that the former locks up and the latter locks out. In confronting these spaces in their heterogeneity, the intervention would strive for an impact like that of Hume's two marbles. Ultimately, it wanted to provide the space where the connections and contradictions that we share as citizens and non-citizens, as “resident aliens and temporary settlers” between faith and pop culture, between militarization and migration show themselves as a shock.

The intervention took the form of a labyrinth, instead of a White Cube. And from Bataille we know that there is no getting around the labyrinth; “distance like proximity, separation like adhesion remain undecidable there. In this sense one is never either inside or outside the labyrinth – a space (perhaps that is already too much to say) that would be constituted by none other than this very anxiety, which is however, incurably undecidable: am I inside or outside?”¹⁴

Position without head

At the Bibliothèque Nationale, Georges Bataille actually worked with the medallion collections. His first article for the magazine was called “Le Cheval Académique,” the academic or classical horse. The text starts with a difference that Bataille observed between classical and Gallic cultures, expressed through the design of horses on coins. The Gauls

elements and masks were banned from display and only introduced back in 1988. Niemeyer, the classical modernist, regarded the traditional mask as superficial masquerade and in conflict with the purity and honesty of his architectural concept.

In doing so, the crucial element of the carnival, the mask, described by Russian author Michail Bakhtin as a device to subvert social stratification and political hierarchies, was excluded. In the context of Rio, these ephemeral elements result from the collaboration of local neighbors to communicate some kind of regional, geographical common background. As a tool of alternative gender construction the masks also play an important role in the Latin American LGBT movement.

¹¹ 2,500,000 is the number of visitors at the Rio Carnival and the number of inhabitants that entered Corrail Cesselesse, a relocation camp in Haiti after the earthquake in 2010.

¹² The forward operating base (FOB) Lightning, in the Paktia province, Afghanistan, with a capacity of 800 soldiers, was closed in 2014. It was surrounded by a wall covered with a ring of barbed wire.

¹³ The organic farmers market at Türkenstrasse in Munich has approximately 800 visitors every Saturday.

¹⁴ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, translated by Betsy Wing, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992, 58

took to minting their own coins from the fourth century B.C., thereby copying Greek coins depicting horses. In their hands, the classical Greek horse, inspired by idealism and portrayed harmoniously, turned into a crazed animal, an insect-like beast. The deformed horse, Bataille argued, promoted “aggressive ugliness, transports linked to the view of blood or to horror, excessive screaming — in other words, what has no meaning, no usefulness.” According to Bataille, the Gaul’s imperfect horse design was not a sign of technical deficiency. Rather, they pushed forth what had been blocked by the Greek conception, namely everything that did not recognize authority, all that expressed the fundamental instability, disorganization and violence of social existence. In purposely using those absurd elements that had been excluded by classical form, and following, instead, their own dark propensities, the Gauls counteracted the Greeks’ idealism. More generally and more importantly for Bataille, the Gauls attacked order’s dominant role —a politics of form.

Bataille’s critical dictionary might be read from this point of departure; from where he opened up inventories and systems of order “in new, illegitimate, unacceptable directions,”¹⁵ from where he started his fight against the systemic assertion of homologous thought and instrumental reason. Collecting fragments for a heterogeneous knowledge and a paradoxical philosophy, Bataille would evoke not just a surrealist art movement, but a surrealist culture and a surrealist way of thinking – a thinking that does not serve progress and that cannot be controlled by homogeneous comprehension, that vanishes when exposed to the teaching of the philosopher-papa, but leaves behind “the excretion of unassimilable elements, which is another way of stating vulgarly that a burst of laughter is the only imaginable and definitively terminal result.”¹⁶

Bataille acknowledged the contradictions inherent to his thinking and the limits that could not be passed, but just circumvented by fiction, poetry and images.

While the first photography exhibition at MoMa in 1933 would introduce Walker Evans’ sober photographs of 19th century houses, the critical dictionary included strange photographs, alienating and bewildering in the way they were confronted, cropped and blown-up — photographer and filmmaker Jean Painlevé had just developed a new technology of macro-photography, to produce close-up portraits of fish, sea horses, skeleton shrimps, and fanworms looking like human traces.

The images were unverifiable, non-hierarchized and scandalous, breaking cartesian-logical links and presenting the formless – l’informe in Bataille’s term – to leave Western idealism and enter a field where all that is “soiled, senile, rank, sordid” would help to overcome the limits of being human —in a concrete sense of a new relation to climate, mud, storms, and flies. Advocating an earthly activity, he denounced human dominance, completed through capitalism and the imbalance effected by an economy based on both scarcity and accumulation. Among the effects of this imbalance Bataille recognized war, alienation, slavery, the destruction of community on the social scale, and the replacement of communication by monologue on the level of the individual.

Bataille consistently aimed at silencing what he understood as human monologue (“and the victim can neither understand nor reply”) produced through logic and power, that is, through the establishment of a homogeneous world. For him, human monologue was an

¹⁵ Dominique Lecoq, cite in: Alastair Brotchie, “Introduction,” in *Encyclopédia Acephalia*, ed. Georges Bataille, assembled & introduced by Alastair Brotchie, London: Atlas Press, 1995, 11

¹⁶ Georges Bataille, cited in: Alastair Brotchie, “Introduction,” in *Encyclopédia Acephalia*, ed. Georges Bataille, assembled & introduced by Alastair Brotchie, London: Atlas Press, 1995, 35

appropriation of the world to make it according to the human, while ignoring “the irreducible waste products of the operation.” In shutting off human monologue, Bataille wanted to enforce a materialist naturalism and retrieve the bestiality of the screams:

"Without a profound complicity with natural forces such as violent death, gushing blood, sudden catastrophes and the horrible cries of pain that accompany them, terrifying ruptures of what had seemed to be immutable, the fall into stinking filth of what had been elevated - without a sadistic understanding of an incontestably thundering and torrential nature, there could be no revolutionaries, there could only be a revolting utopian sentimentality."

Bataille's radical materialism can be read as a post-humanism of climate, mud, storms, and flies; of a tree that places its roots in the dirty ground and of Acéphale, André Masson's headless man. Bataille was fascinated with this anti-Vitruvian figure and eventually he founded a secret society called Acéphale. The mysterious group would meet at night in the woods, near an oak which had been struck by lightning to celebrate headlessness, in the literal way of remembering the decapitation of King Louis XVI, but also in a metaphorical way of the "chiefless crowd." The Acephal is headless, not only man escaping his thoughts, but also a headless organization, one abjuring hierarchy and homogeneity.¹⁷ For Bataille the group would stand for a "politics of the impossible" where the heterogeneous would be given its space to allow for (human-animal, image-text) relations based neither on dominant and totalizing reason, nor on the useful and the instrumentality of means and ends.

Insert 2: Spuren spuren Athen

Exhibition, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart 2015

If traces are material signs that were left behind as “irreducible waste products of the operation”, they have nothing to do with reason or instrumentality. They might be regarded as means without ends, similar to Bataille's text-image collages. Traces can, in fact, be considered (as) headless, as they are most often (and especially in crime scenes, Bataille was quite excited about) not intended. They are produced beyond linear or chronological order because they relate to a future or a past event and also beyond a certain place of origin, since they can be moved to other localities, also as a reference to an exhibition space. Actually, traces comprise a mutual process of transformation, as they are always found and left at the same time.

In Athens, Spuren spuren (tracking traces), referred to this mutual process of collecting and producing traces. In an in-between state, events and interventions were both traced and recorded as well as triggered. In the context of the Greek city, the project developed a concrete mutual transformation of the mythological into the everyday, of global processes into individual resistance, of material remains into the interaction with them and vice versa. The search for and production of traces comprised a set of transversal practices (collection, documentation, improvisation, conversation, interaction, intervention) that collapsed separated homologous fields into open, heterogeneous processes. There was help from two snakes, capital (crisis), beach huts, a desert, and Hölderlin¹⁸ that traversed the processes and thus left traces again .

¹⁷ According to legend, Bataille and the other members of Acéphale agreed to be the victim of a human sacrifice; yet, none of them wanted to be the executioner.

¹⁸ In Athens, traces included following procedures:

The exhibition space was not conceptualized as a static architecture. The practice of traces allowed for the presentation and production within the space that was transformed into the locality of an ongoing process. Spuren spuren became an open space, tracing package holidays and Ouzo, linking to Germany's post-war period clichés concerning Greece and providing the opportunity to get involved in conversations about the future. It showed traces as something in process, neither installed nor displayed, but rather inserted as “irreducible waste products.”

In this sense, traces fail in and they fail the White Cube. They exist in a space that does not suggest the importance of context in their presentation —through distancing. Traces are an appearance of nearness, to borrow the words from Walter Benjamin, which might “indicate a way out of the closure imposed by the system...” and, in that, a politics of form.

1. Financial Crisis

An architecture of balance is constructed from finds, in a transient moment of wind and weather in March, or in a precarious situation near the National Bank —it is filmed without any further intervention.

2. Desert

All objects that were and will be lost by Ivana Sajko (in her story: Szenen mit Apfel,) are rediscovered, documented and mapped on the street markets of Athens.

3. Snake

At the Archaeological Museum two snakes are discovered and taken out of the building. One of them is given to a new owner; the other is skinned and consumed.

4. Hölderlin

In the city center, one gets in contact with passersby, by introducing oneself, asking for tourist tips in the city, and by reading Hölderlin quotes: firstly, each in one's native language, then together as a choir.

5. Beach Hut

1:1 beach huts are rare in Athens; still, they are created by any means and then photographed in different urban contexts in Athens.

Everyday:

One finds, with only one part of the body, corresponding elements of the same dimension almost everywhere within the urban fabric of Athens. This process of measuring is repeated daily.